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# How ‘ya gonna keep’em down at the farm now that they’ve seen Paree?: France in Super Hero Comics

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## “How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em down at the farm now that they’ve seen Paree?”: France in Super Hero Comics

1 Super hero comics are a North-American narrative form. Although their ascendancy points towards European ancestors, and although non-American heroes have been sharing their characteristics for a long time, among them Obelix, Diabolik and many manga characters, the cape and costume genre remains firmly grounded in the United States. It is thus unsurprising that, with a brief exception during the Second World War, super hero narratives should have taken place mostly in the United States (although Metropolis, Superman’s headquarter, was notoriously based on Toronto) or in outer space. In those cases when more exotic locations were needed, a convenient imaginary country could be created in Eastern Europe (see for instance Dr. Doom’s Latveria, which looks strikingly like Universal Studio’s “European Village”). There were exceptions, of course, such as a noteworthy French escapade by DC’s hero *Metamorpho* in the 60’s, but by and large, super-heroes did not venture much into French-speaking regions until the late seventies, with The *X-Men*’s international team standing as a symbol of the genre’s newfound multiculturalism. Although fantastic or American settings remained dominant, it was time for super-heroes to see the world.

### Tourists in Paris

2 Unlike science-fiction, a genre from which it borrows many traits, the super hero narrative sets more emphasis on character interactions than on its setting. Recurrent locations might get a detailed treatment, but the classical approach to places in super-hero comic is that of a backdrop, a convenient scenery in front of which the plot may unfold.

3 Even though the standard length for a story has slowly moved away from eight pages (the typical anthology format of early comic books) to twenty-four (self-contained stories in one issue) to a hundred and thirty-six (six issues, then published as one trade paperback), the time spent outside recurring locations is typically very limited. Visits to France or any other non-American country are confined to one or two issues at the longest, providing little incentive for the writer and illustrator to get into a detailed or original description. In most cases, when France is visited or alluded to, the sense of place is conveyed by a series of clichés, which transform the super heroes’ visit to the country into a touristic escapade. Narrative economy justifies this choice: in those cases when France is just an excuse to introduce some exoticism in the narrative, it makes sense to emphasize this exoticism by using the most striking landmarks of the country. It also makes sense to use places which the reader will recognize instantly, so as to provide a change of scenery without having to put the emphasis on the discovery, which would turn the attention away from the plot, to the background. Hence the use of the best known touristic places, which will be identified as non-American and yet be famous enough for American readers to dispense with further explanation. Besides, super-hero comics published by the two giants of the sectors, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, have historically been conceived as ephemeral and cheap cultural products, often created under serious time constraints. These constraints explain in part the genre’s long focus on familiar American places or on abstract, unrealistic settings, they also explain to a large extent the need to find shortcuts to depict foreign settings with minimal research.

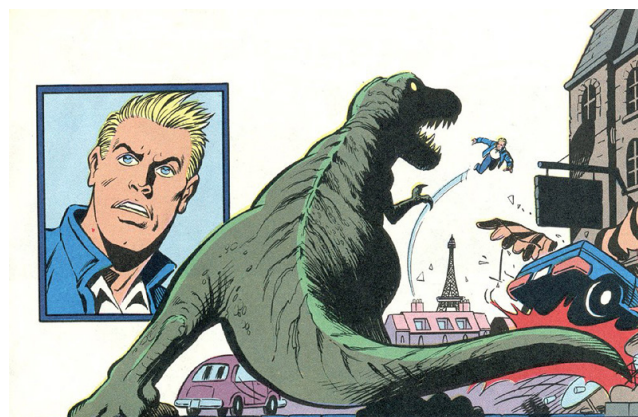
4 These narrative and pragmatic constraints explain why super heroes do not actually visit France, but only Paris. The city has a unique advantage over the rest of the country, in that it possesses that internationally famous landmark, the Eiffel Tower (leaving aside the red-and-white Tokyo copy). Paris represents metonymically France as a whole, and the Eiffel tower is but the ultimate stage in this synthetic representation of the country. It appears that no super-

hero story set in France can dispense with a panel depicting the monument, even in those rare cases when the action does not take place in Paris.<sup>1</sup>

5 This makes sense in scenes which require an efficient visual short-cut, and when French events are reported for a panel or two for instance, it could even be called a necessity. Besides, this use of a visual synecdoche is not specific to comic books, and similar examples could be found in most of popular culture. However, the effect creates strange distortions when the inclusion of the Eiffel tower is supposed to provide all the necessary French background for an extended number of pages. In the otherwise ambitious *Animal Man* n°16 (DC Comics, 1989), for instance, the heroes wander in a city that bear no other resemblance to Paris than the presence of a stout-looking Eiffel Tower. Even in a more recent example, *Fantastic Four* n°541 (Marvel Comics, 2005), which uses the contrast between France and the United States as an important plot element, the Tower is the only graphical element signaling the Frenchness of the setting. Thus, the Eiffel Tower appears as a necessary element in any representation of France, but also, to a large extent, as a sufficient visual marker.



Peter Milligan, Mike Allred, *X-Statix* n°24 ©2004 Marvel Comics.

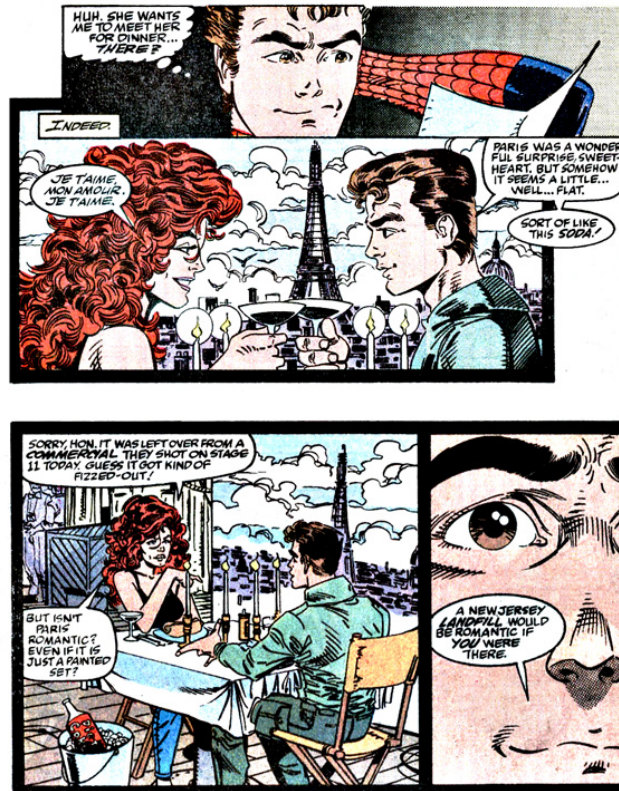


Grant Morrison, Chas Truog *Animal Man* n°16 ©1989 DC Comics.



Michael Straczynski, Mike McKone, *Fantastic Four* n°541 ©2006 Marvel Comics.

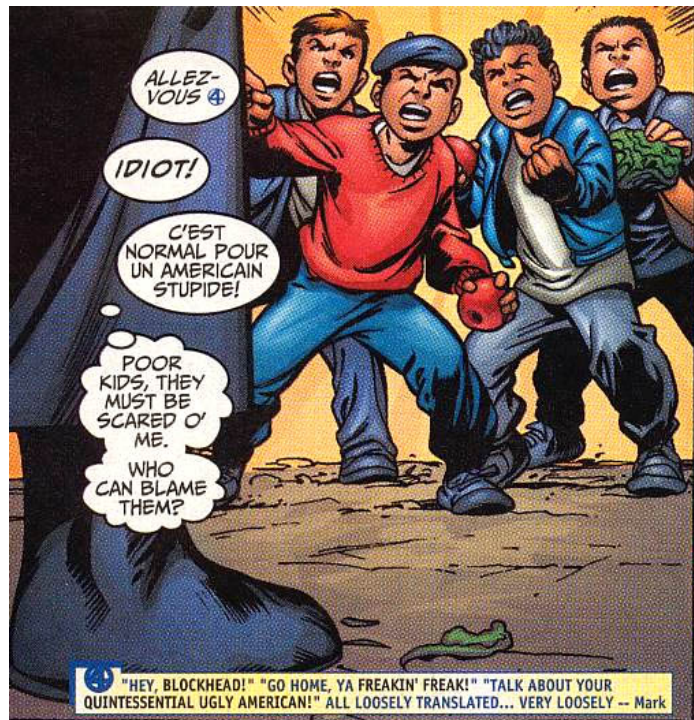
6 An interesting comment on this use of a Parisian background reduced to its most emblematic monument is to be found in a 1990 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the main series devoted to Marvel's emblematic character. The clichéd Parisian backdrop to a romantic evening is revealed, on the next page, to be an actual cardboard set for a TV advertisement. This scene, which alludes ironically to the shallowness and flatness of most Parisian settings in comic books also contains an implicit justification of the use of these settings; after the trick has been played, Mary Jane Watson remarks "Isn't Paris romantic, even if it's just a painted set". The reader is not expected to be fooled by these hastily composed French settings, but he is expected to accept the convention, along with the many other pre-requisites of the well-codified genre.



David Michelinie, Erik Larsen, *The Amazing Spider-Man* n°331 ©1990 Marvel Comics.

- 7 While a unified solution exists to the problem of the visual representation of France, dealing with the language requires more context-specific devices than the inclusion of a recognizable monument in the background. It is worth noting that the simplest solution to this problem, ignoring it altogether and having all the characters use English without explanation, doesn't appear to be used in the case of France: the existence of French as a distinct language is acknowledged.
- 8 Two different sets of conventions are then used: “translating” the French dialogues is the most efficient solution from a narrative standpoint, while restituting them unaltered puts the emphasis on the exoticism of the language, and turns it into an object of attention. Most stories use both conventions alternatively, with main characters speaking in English while secondary characters provide colorful touches of French.
- 9 Mainstream comic books have long developed a series of typographical equivalents to “dubbing”: italicizing a text, using a specific font, or putting it between < > signals that a word balloon is “translated” from a foreign language. This is by far the simplest and most common solution to the problem, which makes sense since it is efficient for the reader but also for writers who can dispense with any mastery of the language thus “translated”. The device is also simple enough to be used in long stories without becoming too cumbersome.<sup>2</sup>
- 10 Cumbersomeness, on the other hand, is what seems to prevent the extensive use of footnotes in comics. While this would appear to be a fitting way to keep the original French in word balloons and provide a translation, the device is barely used at all. In general modern superhero narratives use fewer captions than their predecessors, but the main problem with this type of translation appears to be the creation of a back and forth between the balloon and the notes, which disrupts the flow of the story. The device creates the kind of tension which the use of familiar places is meant to avoid: by having extra-diegetic translations, this type of translations calls attention to itself. It disrupts the narrative illusion to provide what amounts to superfluous cultural information. Narrative efficiency demands that devices which go against the unfolding of the plot be used sparingly.





**“Dubbing” and footnoting, used in Scott Lobdel and Alan Davis *Fantastic Four* n°430 Note that French protesters shout in French but write in English. ©1998 Marvel Comics.**

- 11 Writers seeking to retain some dialogues in French must therefore rely on intra-diegetic translation, realistic but hardly usable over a long period, or simply use French in non-ambiguous situations, which can either be socially codified (“bonjour”, “merci”, etc.) or genre-specific. A striking example of this strategy is to be found in a recent issue of *Daredevil*,<sup>3</sup> set in a well-documented Paris. For a page and a half, the hero interrogates thieves and crooks in French and is answered in the same language, without any translation. In this case, the writer, Ed Brubaker, consciously uses the fact that similar scenes are a recurrent motif of the *Daredevil* narrative, a fact also underlined by the captions, which should allow non-French readers to fill in the gaps for themselves. *Daredevil* is also a character relying on sound rather than sight to find his way, and this use of authentic French is fitting in that respect. Obviously, this means that no crucial piece of information could be given in these pages. This *Daredevil* issue is also notable in that it uses actual French, for in numerous cases, the writer’s own ignorance of the language leads to the use of a barely intelligible Creole, which only underlines the fact that French is used for its exoticism, without any documentary intent.



**Ed Brubaker, Michael Lark and Stefano Gaudiano, *Daredevil* vol. 2n°90 ©2006 Marvel Comics.**

12 The overall effect of these half-hearted representations is a shallow form of exoticism. Distinctly French elements – the Eiffel Tower, the language – are used in a recognizably American context. Not only is the structure of the stories unaffected by the change of location, which limits France’s role to that of a flat background, but this background also fails to cover the essentially American nature of the setting. With all the important characters eventually resorting to using English, with numerous out of place visual details (Newyorkish fire escapes in Parisian buildings, American letter-boxes or street signs, etc.), France in super-hero comics, whatever their publishers, appears mostly as an atypical suburb of America. Were it not for the Eiffel Tower, most representations of France would simply fail to evoke anything but the United States. Because comic book demands that anything included in the narrative be drawn and documented, they reduce France to a limited sets of symbols and expose the reduction process at work in other media but made less conspicuous, notably in mainstream cinema, by the ability to shoot on location.

### France outside, Batroc

13 Whenever they visit France, super-heroes interact more with their usual foes than with the locals. However, some of their usual foes happen to be French, who seemingly spend most of their time in the United States. Statistics suggest that most French characters have to be super-villains, since one hero has numerous foes: one should therefore not read too much in the fact that the most important French in super-hero comics is an international costumed thief, Batroc the (sometimes written “ze”) Leaper.

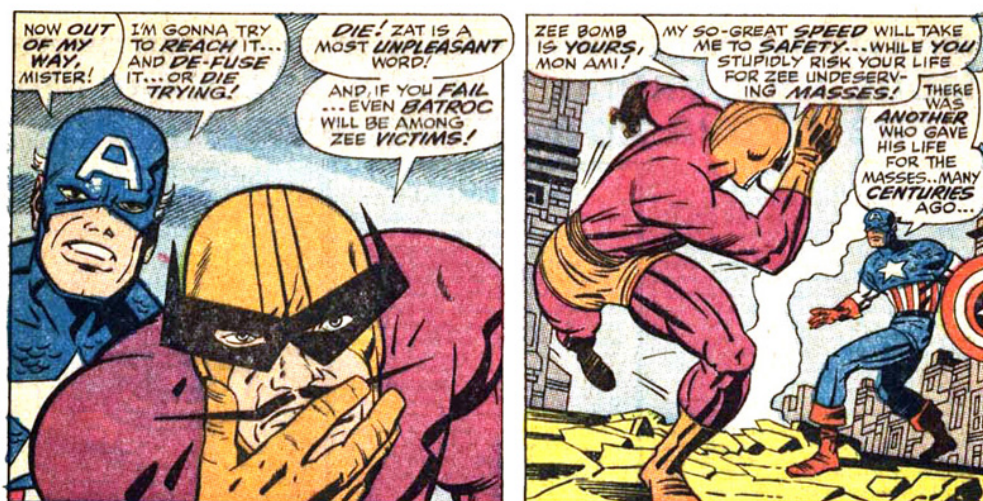
14 First introduced in 1966, Batroc is a living stereotype, in accordance with the rule of design for super-villains (the Red Ghost is an evil immaterial communist, Electro is a master of electricity, etc.), and his function in relation to other villains is the same as Paris’s in relation to North American cities: he plays the same roles as his American counterparts, has the same inner workings, but he must sport enough salient peculiarities to be exotic. Paris has the Tour Eiffel, Batroc, (the leaping batracian) has his accent. His Frenchness is all the more significant in that he was created as an enemy for Captain America, himself a national symbol.

15 When Batroc first appeared in 1966,<sup>4</sup> he was a thief, spicing up his dialogues with a few commonplace French words. Yet as early as his second appearance in Captain America’s own title, two years later,<sup>5</sup> he expressed himself in colorful English, fraught with weirdly accented sentences. Most of the enemies of these resurrected Captain America happened to be foreigners: leftover Nazis, communists or in Batroc’s case, Frenchmen. While his Frenchness has been downplayed over the years, this accent and its hints of foreignness remain, to this day,



the most significant trait of the character. Because he is ridiculous, systematically defeated by Captain America, mocked even by other villains in Marvel Comics' fictional universe, Batroc could be misread as a shallow comic relief. His role as a stereotype was made even clearer for comic book readers in the sixties by his thin moustache, a distinct trait of stereotyped character in Hollywood movies.<sup>6</sup> However, at least in his early appearance, he hints at a more complex place for France in a super heroic narrative. Just as Captain America is more than the embodiment of mainstream American values, France, as embodied by Batroc is not simply the excuse for comic inefficiency.<sup>7</sup> At the end of their first encounter, Captain America, upon discovering Batroc's headquarters exclaims "This fantastic hideout – an escape tube right out of Jules Verne – they're more than penny ante spies". Indeed, there is something Vernian in this character devoid of super powers, but possessing a strong sense of honor, a demonstrative individualism and some hints of cynicism. ("Ah, my petite! I am desolate with grief! It seems I have so carelessly stepped upon your little toy! A thousand pardons!", upon stepping on a gun that was about to be used against him). Batroc is an aristocrat, a gentleman-thief displaced from 19<sup>th</sup> century French popular fiction into a new world. He also serves as a reminder of the filiation between the super-human protagonists of that early French popular culture, Nemo, Robur or Arsène Lupin, and the heroes of so many pulp stories, which in turn shaped early super-hero narratives.<sup>8</sup>

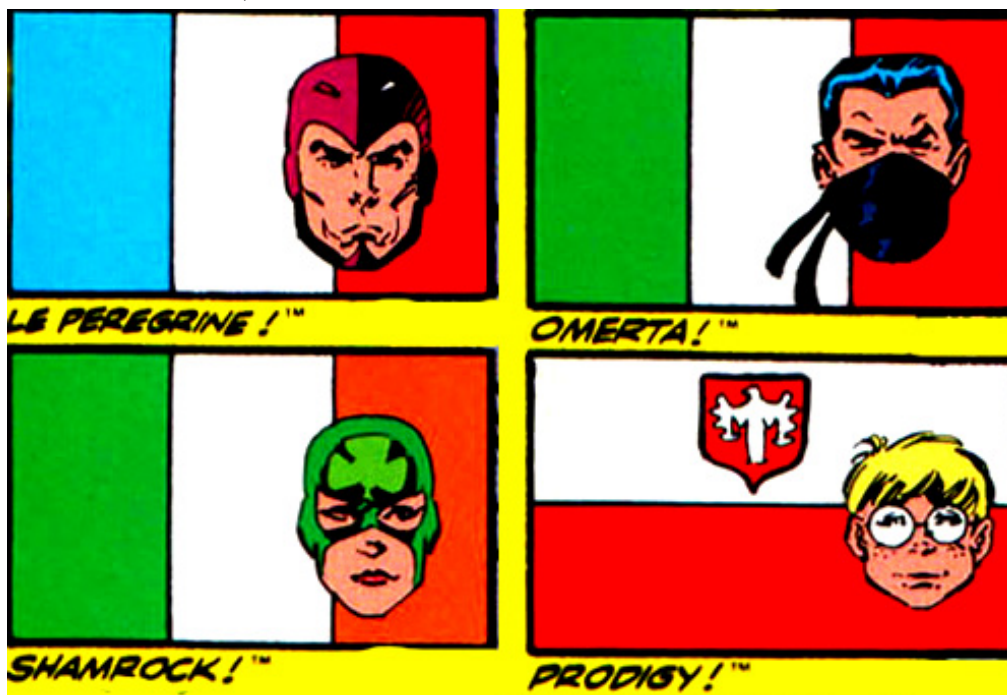
16 At a time when comic books super villains, especially Captain America's foes, were frequently depicted as communists, manipulated by Moscow or Beijing, Batroc is a proud individualist. At the end of his second confrontation with Captain America, the contrast between the two characters even takes a Tocquevillian undertone. As they are both in danger of being destroyed by a bomb, Batroc urges Captain America to "...stupidly risk [his] life for zee undeserving masses", while he makes his escape. This boisterous escape contrasts strongly with the complete defeats inflicted by Captain America to a nazi-Russian army, in the previous issue, and to an operation led by Mao himself, in the next. Being French, Batroc is something of an aristocrat, worthy of the hero's respect, and never appears as a real enemy. Significantly, in their first two encounters, Batroc and Captain America actually join force to stop a catastrophic event which their confrontation has triggered.



Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, "In the Name of Batroc", *Captain America* n°105 ©1968 Marvel Comics.

17 With the years, however, Batroc has been increasingly normalized, and has been so burdened with in-comics history (also known as "continuity") that he has become irrelevant as a pointer toward anything but super-hero comics. Yet, this identification of Frenchness not only with the archetype of the aristocrat-thief but also to a peculiar flavor of popular culture, originating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been reused in other characters. A recent example would be Fantomex, a *X-Men* character modeled on Fantomas and the Italian Diabolik who poses as French because the French accent irritates people, and who possesses some of Batroc's most distinctive features: accent, individualism and disrespect for the law.<sup>9</sup>

18 The role of stereotypes in the definition of French characters cannot, however, be exaggerated. Some characters simply happen to be French, and do not seem overly affected by this origin; the Grey Gargoyle, a minor Marvel villain, is an example of these perfectly assimilated Frenchmen. Nor is stereotyping applied specifically to French characters. A 1992 issue of *Alpha Flight*, a series focusing on a Canadian team of super-heroes, thus presents us with a tour of a few European countries and their respective super-heroes. Omerta, the Italian hero, proves that there are worse fates than a strange accent: using a simple black mask for costume, “he observes a strict vow of silence in his defense of the people of Italy” (*Alpha Flight* n° 108, Marvel Comics, 1992).



19 Four typical European heroes, as seen on the cover of *Alpha Flight*. Scott Lobdel, Tom Morgan, “World Tour”, *Alpha Flight* n°108 ©1992 Marvel Comics.

20 Again, a simple enough explanation for this overwhelming use of clichés and stock references is easily found: nuanced descriptions of foreign places and habits do not fit in a 24 comic-book-sized-page story, with a plot to advance. An accent however, does. The representation of French people is however more nuanced and varied than the representation of France itself. Frenchness defines Batroc, but it is unnoticeable in many other characters. Super hero comics represent France more than they represent the French.

21 Only in longer works can a more detailed approach of France and its inhabitants be found, and among the super-hero corpus, only one series seem to have used France as its main location for more than a few issues, DC’s *Justice League Europe*, at the end of the eighties.

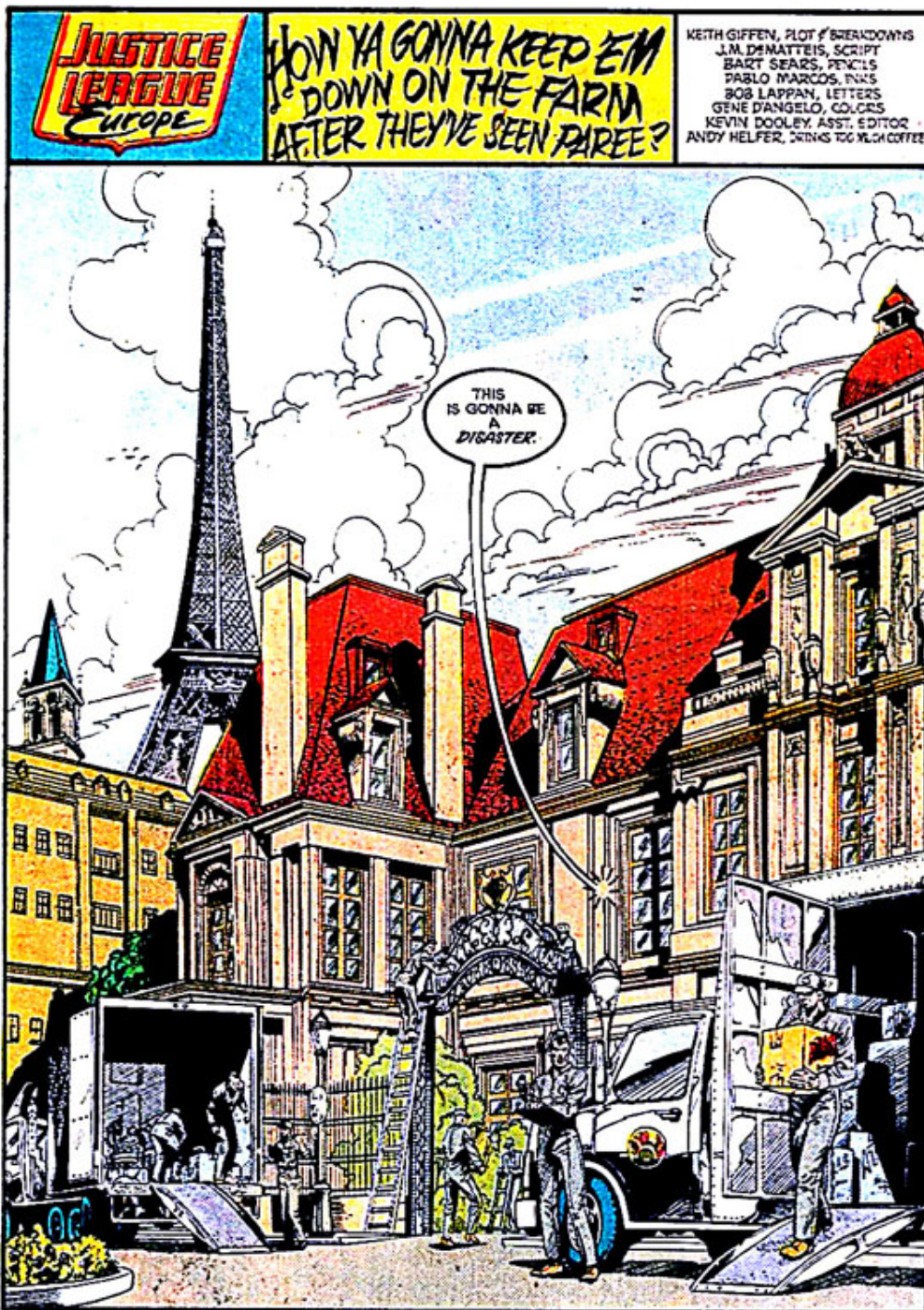
### Justice League Europe, a case study

22 *Justice League Europe* was a spin-off of the better known *Justice League of America*, known at that time as *Justice League International*. The *Justice League* was, and still is, a major part of DC’s super-hero universe. It was created in 1959, and resurrected the concept of the *Justice Society of America*, a previous short-lived team of super-heroes of the forties. Originally composed of the best known characters owned by the editor, including Batman, Superman and Wonder-Woman and written by veteran Gardner Fox, the league went through numerous changes in membership and authorship over the years, until it settled in 1987, into a successful semi-parodic version, written by Keith Giffen and J.M DeMatteis. At a time when super-hero comic were taking a turn towards more serious and darker narratives, following the success of Moore and Gibbons’s *Watchmen* and Frank Millers’s *Dark Knight Returns*, this *Justice League* and its spin-off maintained a light tone, with a self-conscious and referential brand of humor, aimed at young adults. When the team found itself with too many available heroes



(*Justice League International* n°24, DC, 1989), it splits into two entities, the first stayed in the United States, while a second, composed mostly of lesser known heroes, relocated in Paris. The series lasted for four years and fifty issues, before spinning back in, but it used France as a setting for only twenty issues, after which the French embassy was destroyed, and the team moved to London. The massive growth of the comic book market at that time explains the existence of this spin-off, which duplicated the formula of the original series to the extent that the change of setting and the choice of such an unusual location as Paris remain its most notable claim to originality.

23 *Justice League Europe* was written, though not drawn, by the same team, and although it was conceived as the “other” *Justice League*, it was still a high-profile mainstream series: its depiction of France is thus a good index of how the country is perceived and used in the context of a super-hero narrative, with enough space to go beyond the simplest clichés. While these dominate the very first issues (the Eiffel Tower is present in six different pages in the first issue, then on the first page of the second issue), they fade quickly once the series and the team have settled in. By de-emphasizing the most obvious contrasts between the United States and France, the rest of the series creates some space to explore more subtly the idea of Frenchness. France stops being that painted set seen in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, to become a more complex place, caught in an uneasy dialectic between its rich history and its current geopolitical role as a minor power. In turn, reapplying this dialectical reading to some of the super-hero texts presenting an ostensibly simplified version of France reveals that this dual conception is actually deep-seated in super-hero narratives, albeit often obscured by the accumulation of touristic clichés.



The obligatory Eiffel Tower, on the first page of the first issue. Keith Giffen, Jean-Marc DeMatteis and Mark Sears, *Justice League Europe* n°1 ©1989 DC Comics.

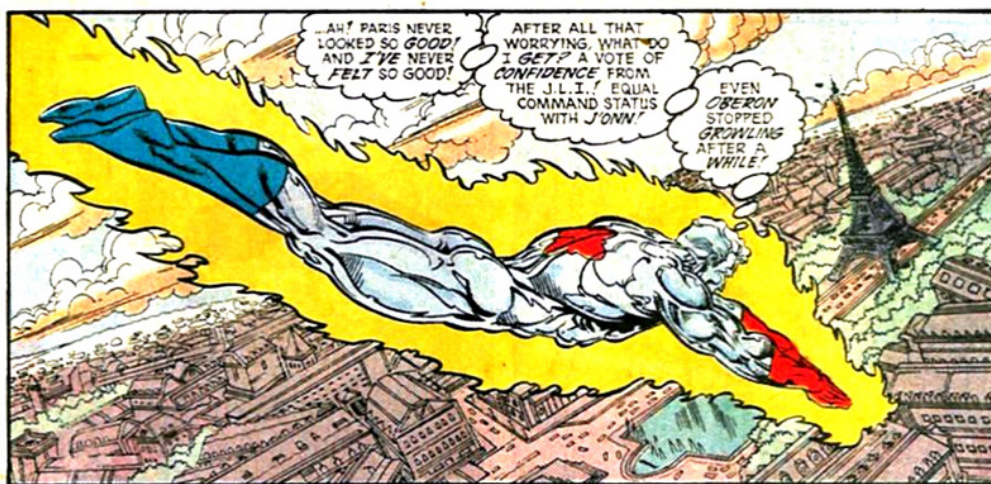
24 *A place of history*

25 The humor and dynamic of the series in its first issue rest in part on the contrast between the super-hero team and their surroundings. None of them is French, and they are depicted as perceiving the country through elementary historical and popular references: “This place looks familiar, like something out of the Hunchback of Notre-Dame” ; “This isn’t Bastille day, is it ?”. The irony here lays in the fact that nothing indicates that the author themselves have anything but a superficial knowledge of the setting of the series. While the presence of some visual research about Paris is manifest in those first pages, it is also apparent throughout the series that this documentation is limited to a few key places. Though more convincing than most, this is still a shallow depiction of Paris, and it bears only intermittent resemblance to the actual city. The title of the very first episode, “How ‘ya gonna keep’em down at the farm



now that they've seen Paree",<sup>10</sup> acknowledges the fact that the series approach France with an outsider gaze.

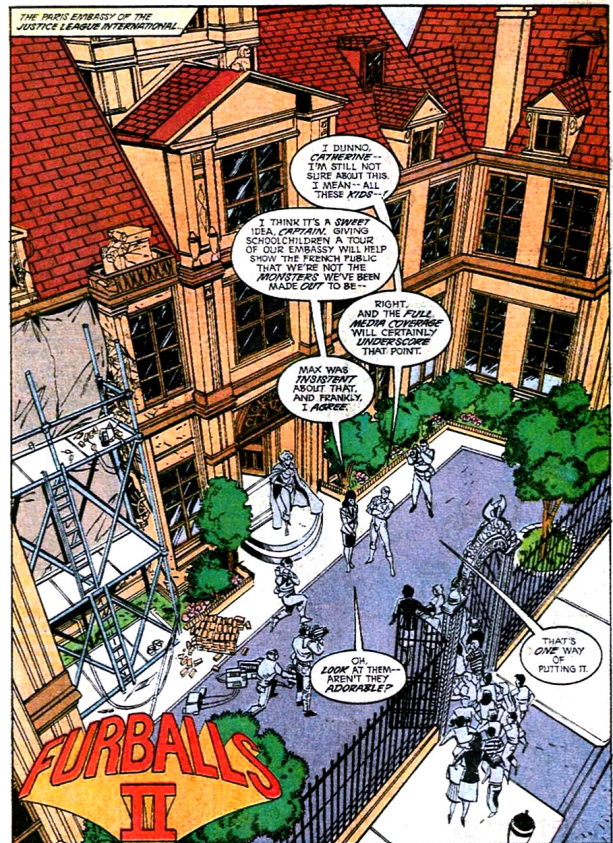
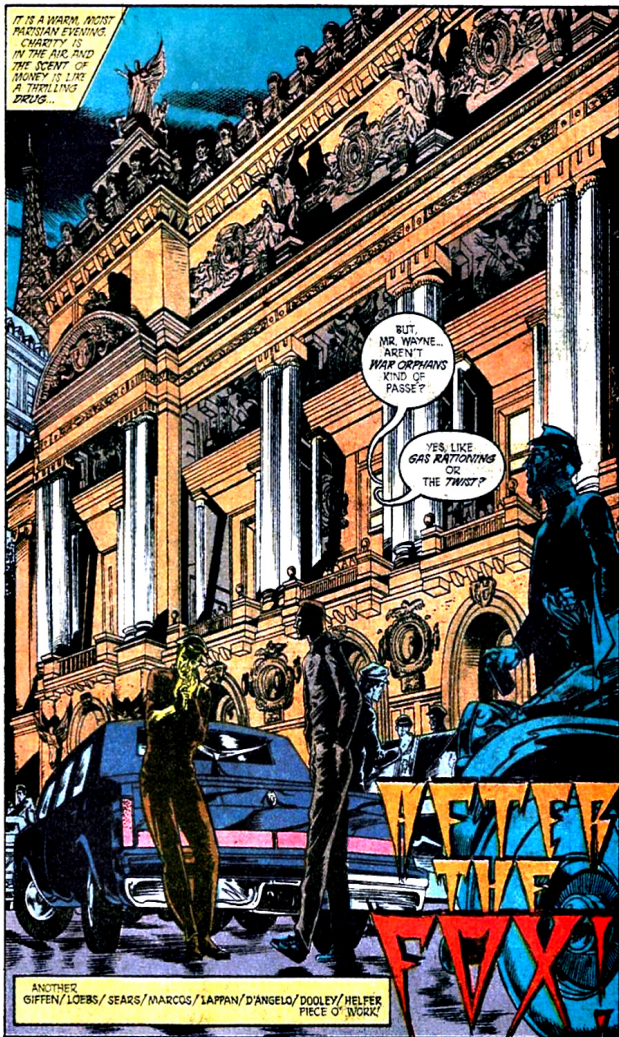
26 While this was in part a necessity, since the creative team did not have a direct knowledge of the country, using this distinctly American point of view of France was also a conscious choice. Responding to reader mail in a later issue, Keith Giffen, the main writer of the series, describes *JLE* as an American book, written for an American audience, with an American perspective ("Europinion", *JLE* 4): the series focus on a group of American in Paris and deliberately adopt their own point of view. Possible factual mistakes in the representation of France do not matter much, as long as they cannot be spotted by American readers. France in *JLE* is not an absolute, the series never tries to present anything but a country reimagined through American eyes, those of the heroes and those of the authors. Answering to reader mail, the authors later admitted gleefully that they kept using erroneous French while knowing how bad it was ("Hey, we got French wrong every time we used it in Paris, why not in England" [about the impending change of setting for the series], *JLE* 15).



**A superficial knowledge of Parisian geography in *JLE* n°5 ©1989 DC Comics.**

27 Besides the visual and aural landmarks, France in *JLE* is depicted as a place of history. This sense of an accessible past even has a distinct graphical presence in the series, through the careful rendering of architecture. While Parisian geography changes issue after issue, the embassy where the team has settled is drawn in a detailed and consistent way. A comparison with the other *Justice League* titles published at the time shows this care devoted to a background element to be atypical: in contemporary issues of *Justice League international* or *Justice League of America*, the headquarter of the team is hardly ever pictured from outside, and scenes taking place inside use functional and anonymous backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> It appears then, that the detailed backgrounds are part of the specific visual identity of *JLE*, one of the distinct angles used by the creator to connote Frenchness and distinguish the book from the other incarnations of the League. Leaving aside the Eiffel Tower, several other buildings are also treated with a care that emphasizes their richness and their age. The dialogues occasionally underline this alien quality of the embassy and by extension of the architecture of the whole city, by having for instance one of the American heroes declare "Back at the ranch", as he walks through the gates (*JLE* 6). On other occasions, the underlying historical significance of Paris is hinted at through historical or cultural allusions, as characters enter intimidating places ("The ghost of Marie-Antoinette is living in this basement", *JLE* 2, "My God, I can't go to jail, especially not a French jail. Oh God, what if it's like *Papillion*?", *JLE* 14) or simply introduce themselves : a French super-heroine, who will later join the team, bears the meaningful name of Vivian d'Aramis (*JLE* 2). Even the use of the Cannes film festival could be included in this evocation of the cultural importance of France, though the manifest lack of documentation in this episode (*JLE* 14) suggests that it is used more as a touristic landmark - with a symbolical value comparable to that of the Eiffel Tower - than as a cultural event.



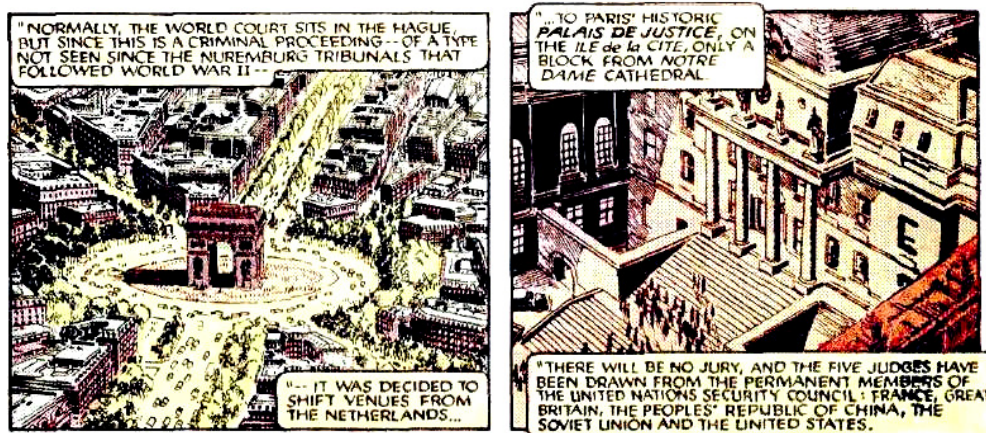


**Two examples of the detailed Parisian architecture (JLE n°10 and n°13) in a simplified graphical universe ©1989 DC Comics.**

- 28 This notion of France as a place of history and culture coexists with the classical touristic representation of the city, both visions making use of the same buildings and cultural references, albeit with a slightly different intent. They can therefore be mistaken for one another in most cases.
- 29 However the special relationship between France and history is apparent in other super-hero comics, most notably in a 1985 issue of the then extremely successful *UncannyX-Men*.<sup>12</sup> In this double-sized issue, the 200<sup>th</sup> of the series, a special international Court of Justice is set up in Paris to judge a super-villain, Magneto. The authors are aware that such a trial would normally take place in The Hague, and even mention it in a caption, but Paris is chosen because this is “a criminal proceeding of a type not seen since the Nuremburg tribunals that followed World War II.” The rest of the issue makes some concessions to the touristic representation of Paris, with fight scenes and dialogues taking place in almost every touristic landmark the



city has to offer, but something remains of the initial intention to transform a publishing event into a meaningful, historical narrative. The story could have taken place in New York or in Massachusetts, two usual locations for the series, saving the writer (Chris Claremont) and penciller (John Romita Jr.) some research, but history is an issue here, with allusions to Israel, concentration camps, and war: setting the story in Paris is a move to further that historical significance.



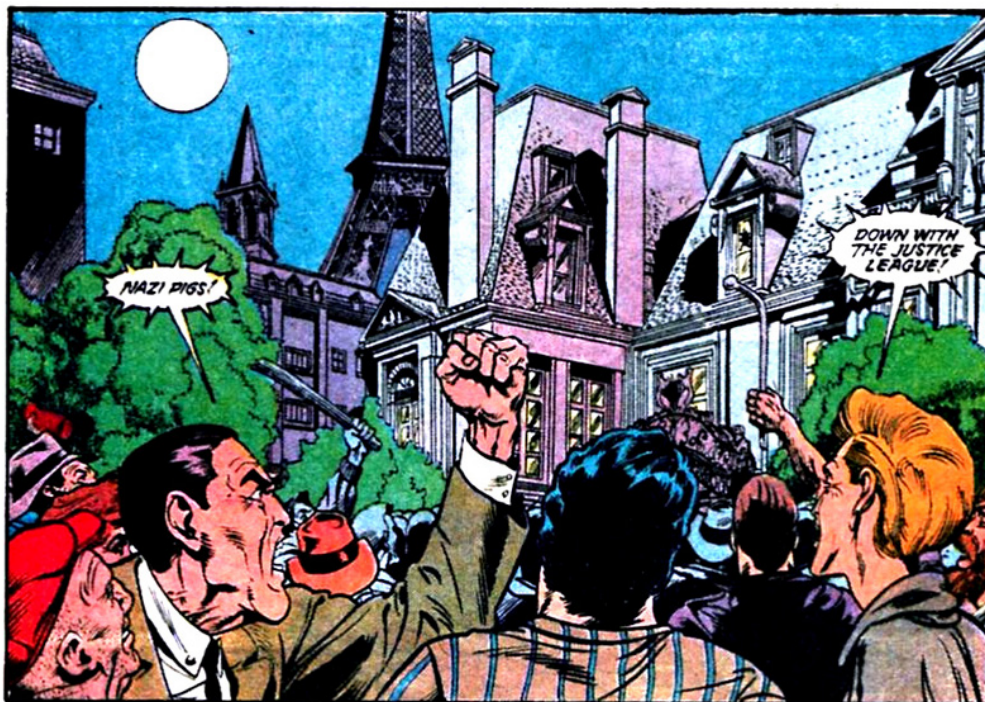
The opening sequence of Chris Claremont, John Romita Jr., *The Uncanny X-Men* n°200 ©1985 Marvel Comics.

30 If *Uncanny X-Men* displays the historical significance of France to claim some of this significance as its own, *Justice League Europe* uses it as revelator of its heroes own assumptions and limitations. The opposition between their tourist mentality of the Americans and the cultural and historical background of the country is woven into the early plots of the series. Symptomatically, in the third issue, the Justice League is accused of having blown up a museum, suggesting a truly explosive confrontation between the two cultures. However, the most explicit confrontation between the cultural naivety of the visitors and the cultural *authority* of France takes place in a story entitled "Back to School". In this sixth issue of the series, the super-heroes are taught French by an old-fashioned school-mistress, with predictably disastrous results. Their constant bickering, between themselves or with the members a team of super-villains who have coincidentally enrolled for the same class, and their eventual inability to master the language locates them as children, unable to focus and learn from adults. Reviewing their performance, the Soviet ambassador concludes: "They are quite harmless, they are like George Bush". Thus, *JLE* echoes the popular opposition between France as a place of intellect and culture against the United States and its popular culture.<sup>13</sup> The opposition set up in the very first issue, the Three Stooges against *Notre Dame de Paris*, is thus more than a humorous device; it becomes at time the main focus of the series. For instance, two bilingual French characters are introduced, which function as bridges between the two countries, but even these are set in a distinct opposition. Catherine Cobert, the embassy's interpreter emphasize a possible integration, while police inspector Camus, a clichéd film noir detective, distrusts the Americans and embodies resistance to their presence. In the classical narrative structure : order – perturbation – conflict – return to order, France appears as the perturbation, which the heroes will have to accept or overcome in order to reach a cathartic *dénouement*. Super hero narratives do not rely much on peaceful acceptance, their attempt to adapt to France, or to make France accept them predictably turns into a violent conflict.

### Arrogance and history

31 This conflict starts in the very first issue, shortly after the American's team arrival in France. While the members of the Justice League try to come to term with their incompetent leader, Captain Atom, their embassy is attacked by a mind-controlled mob. To the calls of "Nazis", they accuse the American super-heroes of protecting a war criminal, found dead in the hall of the building a few pages earlier. The physical threat posed by the rioters is answered by the arrogance of the costumed heroes. "There's an angry mob gathered around our headquarters,

don't you just love Paris?”, Captain Atom asks, while The Flash is even more derogative : “This is what we get for saving their butts during World War II”. It is worth noting that this reference to the Second World War is also employed in the 1985 issue of *UncannyX-Men*, in the second confrontation between Batroc and Captain America, and in numerous other examples. No other period plays a more important role in the shaping of the image of France in super-hero narratives, for it marks a shift in the balance of power. Super hero reflects this idea that the end of the Second World War is the moment when France became a place of history, to the detriment of its contemporary relevance.<sup>14</sup>



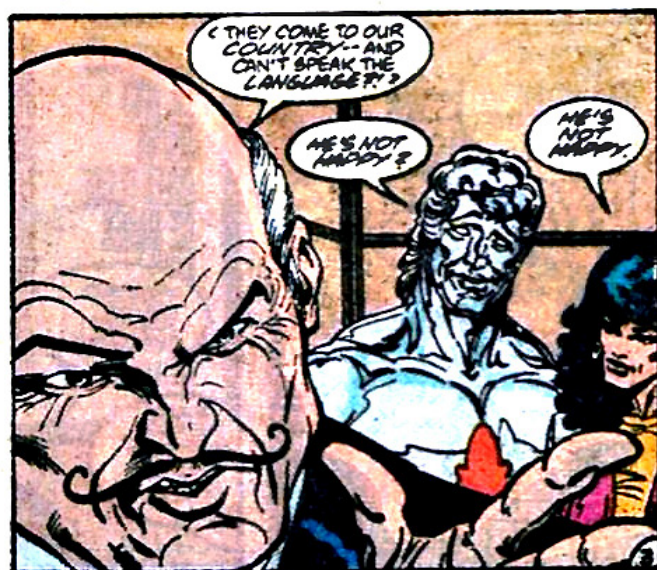
French rioters and the Eiffel Tower, in *JLE* n°1 ©1989 DC Comics.

32 Although the incident ends without any casualty on either side, the hostility thus revealed, reinforced by Camus's comments on the event, shocks the Americans into self examination : “I thought the Justice League was held in high regard all across man's world”, asks Wonder Woman. “Could I have been wrong?”. She is proven wrong indeed by the next few issues, during which French national pride clashes with the Americans' own refusal to make concessions to the local customs. A recurring opposition over language, culminating in the French lesson mentioned earlier, runs through early issues of the series: the anger of a French official in the third issue “What? They come to our country and they don't know the language?” is answered by the remark of an American employee of the embassy in the sixth issue: “I'm American, I don't need to know French”. While the heroes themselves may not share the full extent of this spite, it remains that none of them speak French. The fact is even underlined within the narrative, thus confirming that this confrontation between France and the United States is deliberately chosen as the main theme of the early issues of the series.

33 Facing this open scorn, the French crowd comes to judge the heroes harshly. After an attack in a museum, blamed on the Justice League but actually caused by super-villains, bystanders explicitly reject the super-heroes presence on their soil “The Americans are thugs, the Justice League should be thrown out of Paris, out of Europe” (*JLE* 3). The opposition between super-powered characters and the rest of the population has been requalified as an opposition between France and the United States. More importantly, wrongs are apparently shared, since even though the French jump to conclusions and are manipulated, the heroes do nothing to accommodate their hosts' feelings. Combined with the insistence on the richness of French history, this even suggests that in this contest of arrogance, the French are the most justified in their complaints. Within the narrative, this judgment is supported by the two mediating



characters, Cobert and Camus, who both place the blame on the Justice League for failing to adapt to local customs.



**Skirmishes in the confrontation over language in *JLE* n°3 and n°6 ©1989 DC Comics.**

34 However, this intended reading of the cultural conflict at work need be nuanced by what the structure of the series itself implies. These super-heroes might be stupid, they might be arrogant, but they are still heroes. They might fail to cope with the consequences of the villains' plot, but eventually, they will be the ones who stop these villains, a feat the French are incapable of. When they are not busy learning French, they do save the world and strike the usual heroic poses which the genre has led the reader to expect.

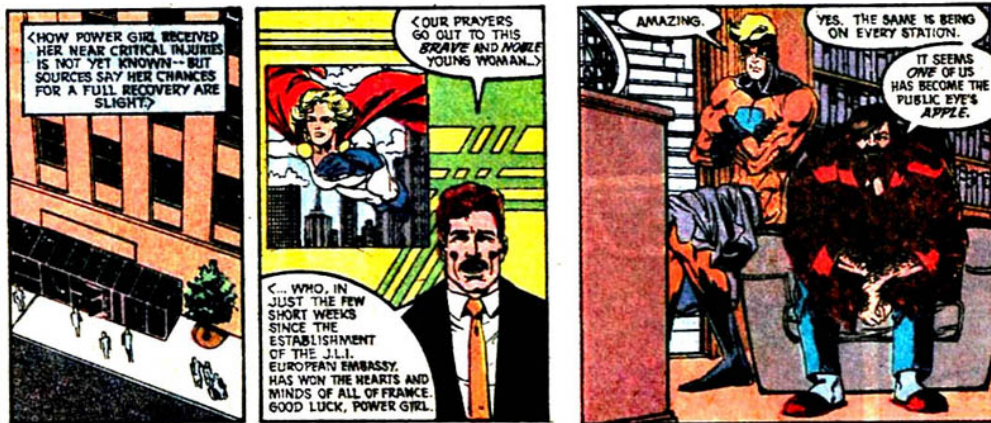
35 *JLE* and the other contemporary *Justice League* series never cease to make fun of the conventions of super-hero narratives. Their unusual characterization seems to question the very notion of heroes. Yet, by having these weak and egotistical characters perform feats comparable to those of their monolithic and openly heroic predecessors, they also reinforce the conventions they are exposing. Their superficial subversion is ultimately negated by the constraints of the genre. Similarly, the apparent defeat of the super-heroes in their confrontation with France is ultimately belied by a larger survey of the series. The covers of *JLE* provide a telling summary of this back-and-forth between humorous personal subplots and a more classical depiction of heroes in front of global threats. In their contest of pride with the French, the locals undeniably have the richest background, the richest history, but arrogant and misguided as the Justice League may be, they will rightfully appear as saviors a few issues later. Thus one plot, or subplot, is played against the economy of the whole super-heroic genre, which demands heroic deeds from its protagonists, lest the story should become a complete parody. The specific style chosen by the writers is still constrained by the limits of a genre to which choose to adhere,<sup>15</sup> and the apparent defeat of the Justice League can only be temporary or limited.



**The tell-tale covers of *JLE* a style eventually bowing to the demands of a genre (*JLE* n°6 and n°19) ©1989 an 1990 DC Comics.**

36 Within the fictional world, this heroic quality of the American protagonists comes to be accepted, but only slowly: the super-heroes accomplish their most striking feat outside France and never in French-centered storylines. This difference between the information available to the readers and that available to French characters within the diegesis allows the writers to maintain some degree of tensions between France and the visiting heroes, long after any doubt about their legitimacy has been dispelled for the reader. Consequently, while France is described in the early issues as having legitimate complaints about the presence of the Justice League, these complaints appear increasingly ill-founded as the series progresses. History is still on France's side, but the present situation demands the presence and action of the American heroes. Significantly, as soon as the French see the heroes in action, see them for what they really are, public opinion changes. When Power Girl - a Supergirl inspired character - is wounded in a fight, the bewildered heroes realize that they have finally been accepted.



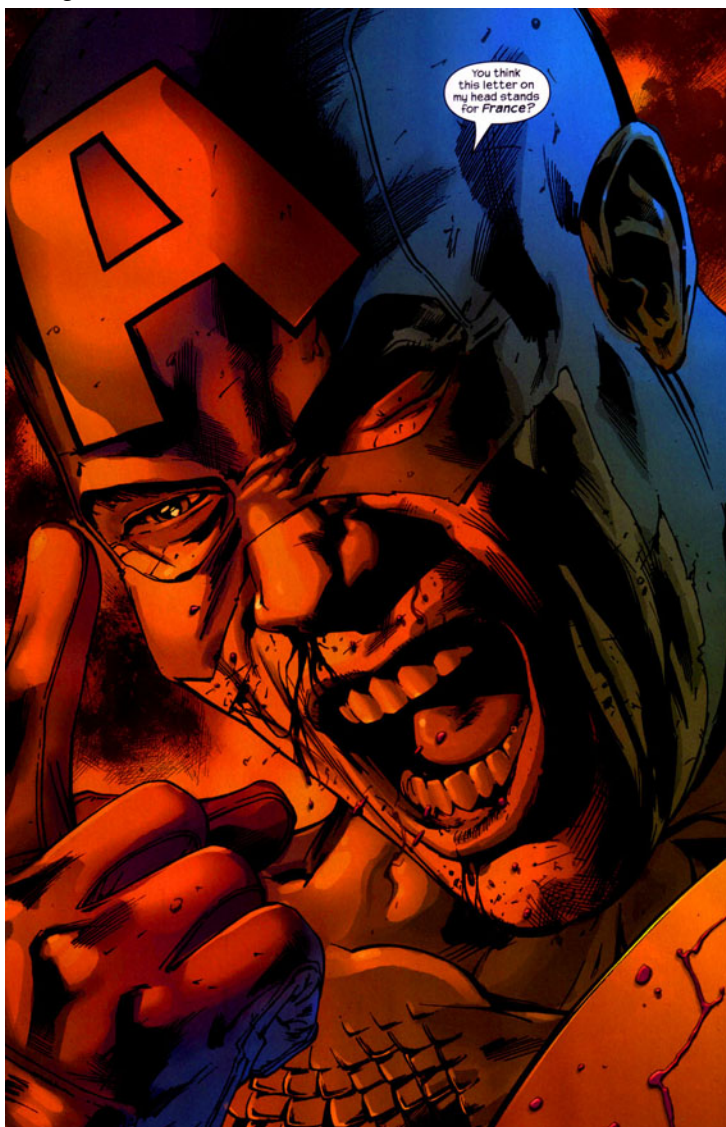


**A sudden change in public opinion in *JLE* n°9 ©1989 DC Comics.**

- 37 Because she has acted as a hero, she redeems the whole team and retrospectively vindicates the unjustly hated heroes.<sup>16</sup> Later, when Superman shows up for a brief guest-appearance, he is also welcomed and celebrated as a savior. When super-heroes behave as super-heroes, they are celebrated even by the superficially hostile French people. In other word, when the Americans play their role in public as a peace-keeping force, imposing a thinly veiled *pax Americana*, they do earn a well-deserved gratitude.
- 38 The reason for this is never clearly spelt out in the series, nor is any apparent explanation given for the presence of the Justice League in Europe, but it all boils down to the notion that in this fictional universe, Europe is unable to defend itself. Captain Atom, leader of the team, can therefore legitimate his presence and actions in spite of his initial unpopularity “Is it my fault that there are no European heroes worth their salt?”. Europe is weak, and needs an American defender, and the conclusions reached in 1945 about the United-States as a necessary protector of the region are reaffirmed as a valid paradigm for the eighties.<sup>17</sup> *JLE* coincides with the collapse of the Eastern block but it perpetuates a representation of Western Europe as an American protectorate, and contemporary geopolitics is played against the weight of history. Fukuyama’s much publicized essay on the “End of History” is published that same year and *JLE* echoes that pronouncement: the American heroes have no history, known no history, but their pride in front of a people weighed down by its sense of belonging to history is ultimately justified as a politic and strategic necessity. The perceived arrogance of the super-heroes was only self-confidence, while the French national pride turns out to be a way to cope with their actual weakness. A feminine France, “excentric, hysterical, morally and physically weak”, to quote from Boris Le Chaffotec, is thus rescued by masculine American heroes in a very masculine genre.<sup>18</sup>
- 39 Thus, while conceding the richness of France’s past, *JLE* contrasts it with its current geopolitical insignificance. This brings us back to the Second World War, perceived as turning point, which signaled the end of France and Europe’s dominance and autonomy, while being the same time signaling the moment super-heroes appeared in print. A comparison with the First World War – a conflict completely absent from super-hero comics – also shows that these multiple allusions to the second global conflict do merely point to previous American military interventions in Europe, they also recall the emergence of the United States as a superpower and the simultaneous relegation of Europe to a subsidiary status. It bears repeating that the very title of the first episode, “How ya gonna keep’m down at the Farm Now That They’ve Seen Patee” is taken from a 1942 musical, which served a propaganda work for the Second World War.



40 This historical landmark and the following alterations in the balance of power are only hinted at in JLE, though Flash's remark should really be read "this is what we get for saving their asses *since* WWII", but in times of tensions between France and the United States, such pronouncements appear more openly and more aggressively. In November 2003, during the diplomatic crisis over the war in Irak, French-bashing found its definitive expression in superhero comics in *The Ultimates*, published by in the United States by Marvel Comics but created by British authors, writer Mark Millar and penciller Bryan Hitch.<sup>19</sup> At the end of a battle with shapeshifting alien nazis, the main villain asks Captain America to surrender, to which the hero answers "Do you think the letter on my head stands for France?", before rallying to win the fight.<sup>20</sup>



**"Surrender? Surrender? Do you think this letter on my head stands for France ? Mark Millar, Bryan Hitch, *The Ultimates* n°12 ©2003 Marvel Comics.**

41 The issue was published during the notorious eruption of French-bashing in the United States public sphere, following the dispute on the war in Irak, and the joke is no different in tone that many others which could be heard on late-night shows or even in print at the time.<sup>21</sup> However, having Captain America speak the line provides it with unusual historical undertones. In his narrative universe, Captain America is a World War 2 hero, who was only resurrected at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but who nevertheless confirm a contemporary popular stereotype about the French. The joke effectively affirms that French history ended with the American intervention in the Second World War, a notion which is the key to understand why representations of the country focus so heavily on its history and culture, treating it with

few exceptions as a touristic or historic playground more than a relevant modern geopolitical entity.<sup>22</sup> In this, super-hero comics follow once more a trend evident in other media. Of 92 films mainstream American films featuring France since 1980, no less than 45% are period pieces, and a vast number among the remaining 65% focus solely on touristic landmarks and history, playgrounds for Anglo-American action hero.<sup>23</sup>

42 Removed from history, France is a place of nostalgia. In a recent *Fantastic Four* issue, in the middle of a storyline called “Civil War”, dealing with a major crisis within the American super-hero community, The Thing, a member of the team, chooses to fly to France to avoid being caught in the conflict. There, he encounters an old-fashioned team of French super-heroes, modeled after DC’s *Justice League*, fighting similarly old-fashioned non-ambiguous villains. Moved to tears, the Thing declares to his host

I’m okay, it’s just... it’s just like the old days. Back when there weren’t all these conspiracies and you knew who the good guys were and the bad guys, and there wasn’t this... this... freaking civil war.<sup>24</sup>

43 The tone is much gentler than in *The Ultimates* or even *JLE*, but the message is ultimately the same: France is sheltered from modern events, it escapes contemporary struggle. It is fitting, then, that this issue should end with a quotation from *Casablanca* (“this is the beginning of a wonderful friendship”), which brings us back once more to the Second World War and to Hollywood films of that period as a major source for current stereotypes.

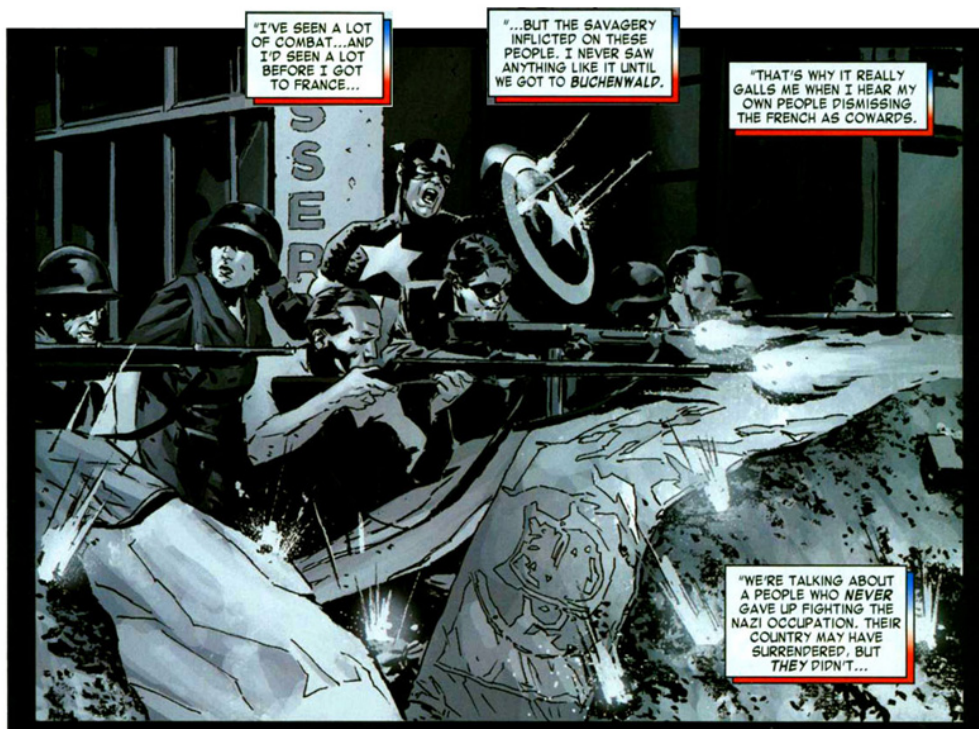
44 Beside this statement of impotence and non-relevance, *JLE* manages to reverse the Tocquevillian perspective on the respective role of the masses in France and in the United States. While the numerous heroes all have separate identities and recognizable name, there are only four identified French characters over the first twenty issues of the series. The angry mob which invades the embassy in the first issue is the dominant mode of representation of the French people. That mob may be appreciative, sarcastic (in issue 13, a group of children visit the embassy and keep asking for Batman, a “real” super-hero, while putting down the *JLE* team), or openly hostile, but it never ceases to be a mob. Even in the last issue set in France, before the destruction of the embassy, at a time when the Justice League has been fully embraced by the French people, the crowd is unruly and disrespectful. When Power Girl’s impressive anatomy raises a storm of catcalls and appreciative comments, she has to deplore: “I guess it was too much to hope that the French would pick today to disprove their stereotype.” This is ironical, coming from a stereotypical character primarily known for the size of her breasts, but it does point to a reversal of the a classical European depiction of the United States. In *JLE*, the crowd, Gustave Le Bon’s *foule*, is French, while the United States are represented by flawed yet heroic individuals. This conception is widely shared within a super-heroic narrative. Because France is treated as a playground for American heroes, and because these heroes are by necessity the center of the story in their own comic books, it appears a country mostly populated by a nameless crowd. A similar study conducted on the representation of other countries outside North-America would probably yield the same result on that specific point, but it is specifically emphasized in *JLE*.

45 To a large extent, these conclusions could also be applied to a study of France in other popular media. However, there is a crucial difference between comics and filmed narrative, in that comic book creators have to bring into the scene everything they feel is necessary to convey a sense of place. When a *Sex and the City* episode or a *Bourne* movie is shot in Paris, it will focus on predictable symbols and leave out of frame significant elements about the place. Yet, *in the frame*, the details and extras will confirm the reality of the place, even through accidental presence. There is no such accidental presence, no accidental detail on a comic book page, and the sense of place can be provided only by what has been deliberately chosen by the creators. The detailed architecture of the historical buildings and the bare streets in *JLE* are important and visible narrative choices, laying bare the foundation of what constitutes France for the series’ creators and what they try to convey to their readers. Super hero comics in particular, because they fit in a demanding narrative mode, outline a representation of France as a minimal set of symbols.<sup>25</sup>



## The Trappings of Self-Referentiality

- 46 When Captain America is written as openly despising France, it does point to some deeply seated stereotypes, which can be found, albeit in a more pacified way, in several other super-hero comics. It also points to a fundamental aspect of these comics, especially over the last twenty five years: while they occasionally take their inspiration directly from contemporary events and attitudes (anti-French resentment about the war in Iraq in this case), they mostly respond to other narratives and representations within their own genre. Modern super-hero comics are defined by their self-referentiality.<sup>26</sup>
- 47 That line from *The Ultimates* caused numerous reactions, notably from writers working for the same publisher, Marvel Comics. While some enthusiasm about the joke could be found among readers (at least among readers discussing comic books on Internet forums), it also led to a reaction within the comics themselves. Ed Brubaker, writing the non-Ultimate version of Captain America a few months later used the character to deliver a speech praising French soldiers during the Second World War. While this is an alternative view of France in a super-hero story, it is first and foremost a reaction to Millar's outrageous line.

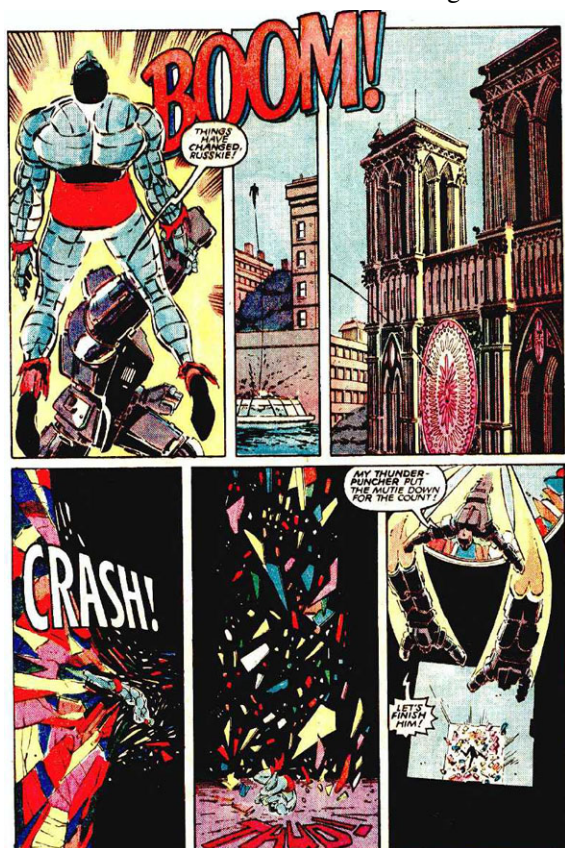


Reacting to Mark Millar's French-bashing in Ed Brubaker's *Captain America* v3 n°3 ©2005 Marvel Comics.

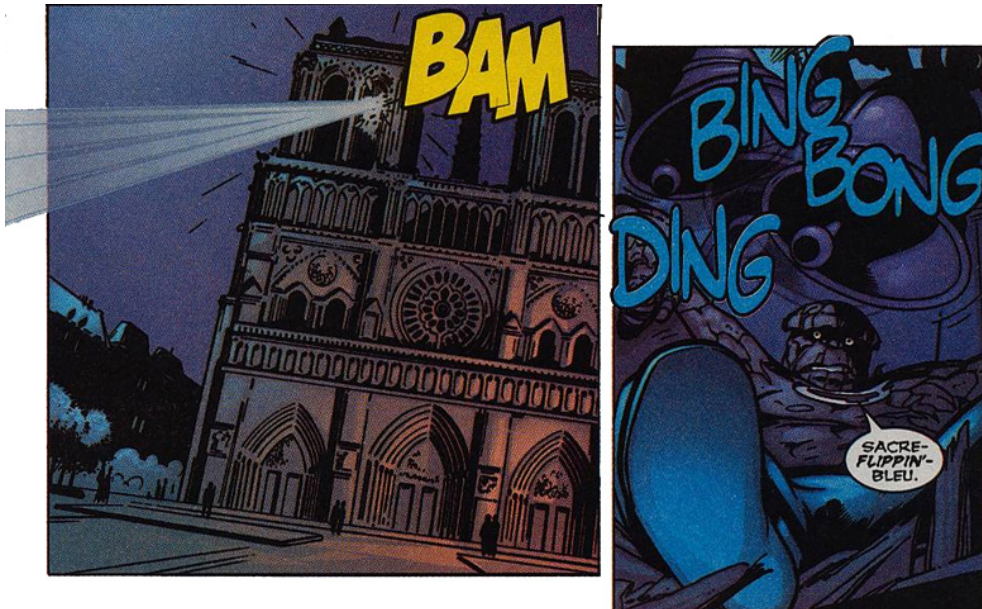
- 48 Going deeper in this self-referential network, another connection can be found, which minimize the value of that line as a cultural comment by emphasizing its role as a self-referential marker. Mark Millar, writer of *The Ultimates*, became famous in comic-book circles when he took over *The Authority*<sup>27</sup> in 2000, and turned what was already an engaging and unconventional super-hero series into a deliberately outrageous series. In one his first issues, Millar depicts the invasion of France, and writes the following dialogue between a US soldier and his officer:
- “Feels kinda weird torching civilians”
- “Civilians are civilized, soldier. These people are French. As much as I hate Mexicans, Asians, and Blacks, no racial group boils my blood more than these sweaty horse-eating yahoos. Dr Krigstein promised me I could keep Chirac's skull as a cigarbox once we leveled their parliament building.”<sup>28</sup>
- 49 In this earlier case, the anti-French diatribe is clearly played as a sarcastic exaggeration of existing stereotypes, a fact further confirmed by the defeat of the American soldiers in the hand

of one the heroes. By reusing this same character of the French-despising American soldier in a different role in *The Ultimates*, Millar may be making a concession to the *Zeitgeist*, but he also intentionally turns Captain America into a less than likeable character, especially for readers familiar with his previous work.<sup>29</sup> While the series ostensibly displays its grounding in modern popular culture, with multiple allusions to existing actors and politicians, it is also essentially a self-conscious exercise in re-reading older stories. Self-referentiality and irony in modern super-hero comics makes it risky to look at them for representations of anything but the genre itself. With each successive comment on a comment and copy of previous copies, a loss of resolution occurs, which threatens to entirely obliterate the original inspiration, be it France or any other object.

50 Another telling example can be found in comparing the respective trip to Paris of two Marvel Comics super-hero teams: the X-Men in 1985 and the Fantastic Four in 1998. In the latter story, the Thing, a rock-like super-strong character, is projected through the stained glass of Notre Dame. It would be tempting to read in it a clever allusion to Hugo's Quasimodo, to whom the Thing bears some resemblance. However, this scene is but a remake of a similar event in the 1985 *X-Men* issue, in which Colossus, who is to the X-Men what the Thing is to the Fantastic four, was projected inside Notre Dame. Providing the 1985 scene was not itself based on a previous comic-book, it did hint at a connection between Hugo's character and the super-hero. The 1998 version, on the other hand, moves further away from this reference and should in all likelihood be read as nothing more than an in-genre reference.







The original scene and its remake. *X-Men 100* above and *Fantastic Four 430* below ©1985 and 1998 Marvel Comics.

- 51 The extent of this self-referentiality and the subsequent removal of exterior points of reference suggest that it may be dangerous to talk about a *representation* of France in modern super-hero comics. It would probably be more appropriate to consider France as a purely narrative element, which can be brought about when the need occurs. This item has characteristics which have been established and refined from story to story, with episodic modifications to take into account outside elements, such as public hostility to France in the United States after 2003, but it does not try to emulate an outside reality than the Paris “painted set” in *The Amazing Spider-Man*.
- 52 The remarkable *X-Statix* series – a spin-off of the X-Men franchise which relies a lot on second-guessing academic readings of super-hero comics – provides us with a final example of this growing opacity of the genre. In an issue cover-dated October 2003, one month before Millar’s line in *The Ultimates*, scenarist Peter Milligan introduces a new super-villain in the series, the Surrender Monkey, whose main super-power is “the uncanny ability to quit at just the right time”. This blatant case of French bashing<sup>30</sup> was however followed by a cynic denial a few issues later: the Surrender Monkey was really an American agent, whose job was to discredit France during the preparation for the war in Iraq. Whatever cultural reading could have been suggested by the first appearance of the Monkey is thus negated or even reversed by this subsequent revelation.





**The Surrender Monkey introduced then unmasked. Peter Milligan and Mike Allred, *X-Statix* 13 and *X-Statix* 24 ©2003 and 2004 Marvel Comics.**

- 53 Super-hero comics have become so reliant on irony and self-referentiality that it would be dangerous to assume they aim at representing reality, or anything else than other modes of discourses. Some, such as *X-Statix*, have adopted a deliberately post-modern attitude, while others only try to adhere to the accumulated codes and constraints of the genre, but in both cases they rely increasingly on previous representations, on fossilized codes. The genre is dependent on its own history, but less and less on external influences, lending itself to diachronic readings but becoming resistant to synchronic interpretations. Thus, contemporary representations deliberately play with the stereotypes which were used as valid plot elements as late as *Justice League Europe*, for all its ironical stance.
- 54 However, the complete disappearance of the country itself, its dematerialization and replacement by a set of signs is necessarily meaningful. France, in super-hero comics, has become insignificant enough to be not much more grounded in reality than Batroc ze Leaper, for instance, which can and probably should be read as a kind of symbolic subordination. Only further studies could reveal if this fate affects everything in super-hero narratives or if it reflects a specific attitude towards France and/or Europe.

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#### Notes

1 For example, the cover and first panel of *X-Statix* n°24 represents the Eiffel Tower, while the action takes place outside Paris. The only exception seems to be issue 16 of *The Authority*, which uses the Arc de Triomphe instead for a brief scene in Paris. Peter Milligan, Mike Allred, *X-Statix* n°24 (Marvel Comics, August 2004). Mark Millar and Frank Quietly, *The Authority* n°16 (New York : DC/Wildstorm, August 2000) [all comic-book references will use this format : writer then penciller, followed by complete references, including the cover date for individual issues].

2 Thus, in Frank Miller and Chris Claremont's four-issue limited series *Wolverine* (New York : Marvel Comics, 1982), set in Japan, dialogues are set between < > for almost ninety pages, while captions are all in English without any typographical marks. This contrast is what enables the convention to retain some relevancy even over such a long page count.

3 Created in 1964 by Stan Lee and Bill Everett, *Daredevil* – a blind vigilante, with heightened senses, dressed in a devil-like costume – is mostly associated with Frank Miller and Brian Michael Bendis, who emphasized the *noirish* elements in the series. Compared to most super-hero series, it aspires to relative realism and small scale, in a street-level urban environment.

4 Stan Lee, Jack Kirby (layouts) and Dick Ayers (pencils), "30 Minutes to Live", *Tales of Suspense* n°75 and 76, (Marvel Comics, March and April, 1966).

5 Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, "In the Name of Batroc", *Captain America* n°105, (Marvel Comics, September 1968).

6 A detail pointed out by Julien Bourget in his presentation "The Woman on the Beach de Renoir: film de genre ou film d'auteur ?", AFEA Congress "France in America" (Paris, May 25, 2007).

- 7 Captain America, for instance, was at war with Germany long before the United States, and famously abandoned his role as a national symbol in the early seventies, following the Watergate. Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation, the Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 30-36 and 243-5.
- 8 Brian Aldiss, David Wingrove, *The Trillion Year Spree* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2001), 99-103. Wright, *Comic Book Nation, op. cit.*, 5.
- 9 Grant Morrison, Igor Kordey, “New Worlds”, “Fantomex” and “Weapon Twelve”, *New X-Men* n°118-120 (Marvel Comics, June-August, 2002).
- 10 The title is originally that of a song from a Gene Kelly and Judy Garland musical, *For Me and My Gal* (Busby Berkeley, 1942). The film, set in First World War, features strong appeal to patriotism, intended for its contemporary audience.
- 11 This is all the more noticeable since the Justice League, a team of powerful heroes, lends itself well to a spectacular treatment. Later versions of the team, written by Grant Morrison or Mark Waid, put the emphasis strongly on this sense of wonder.
- 12 Published by Marvel Comics, the *X-Men* were created in 1964 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. In 1975, they were reinvented as an international team and the series became a central franchise for the publisher. While the series was not particularly subtle in its treatment of foreignness (its Russian member was a literal “man of steel”, for instance), it was well-suited to the presentation of non-American settings.
- 13 This opposition grounds popular comparisons between the two countries as well as academic comparative approaches, as exemplified by Wendy Pfeffer’s analysis of game shows in both countries. Wendy Pfeffer “Intellectual are more popular in France: The Case of French and American Game Shows” in Roger Rollin[ed.] *The Americanization of the global village: essays in comparative popular culture* (Madison, Bowling Green University Popular Press: 1989), 24-32.
- 14 According to French ambassador Jacques Leprettes : « On peut donc considérer qu’à Washington, la France a été mise en observation - pour ne pas dire entre parenthèses - à la suite de juin 1940 », quoted in Pierre Verluise, « Quelles sont les images de la France à l’étranger ? » *Diploweb, la revue géopolitique* (January 2001), <http://www.diploweb.com/france/24.htm> [Accessed in March 2010]
- 15 There is a fine line between this humorous reading of the Justice League and an acknowledged parody. When the two writers, Giffen and DeMatteis, later returned to these characters, under the telling titles *Formerly known as the Justice League* (2003) and *I Can’t Believe It’s Not the Justice League* (2005), which presented them as B-list half-forgotten heroes, it seemed they had abandoned the element of seriousness which marked their previous works. However, in interviews, the authors have made it clear that they were no less serious in these recent efforts than in their late eighties work. Interview by Jonathan Encarnacion “Boom! Studios BIG Ones: Keith Giffen and JM DeMatteis Unexpurgated!” <http://www.silverbulletcomics.com/news/story.php?a=488> (June 2005) [accessed October 2007].
- 16 Richard Reynolds, working on the mythological structure of super-hero narratives, remarks that super-heroes never win as easily as they should. The struggle only becomes interesting when they have to do something else than just using their powers: in order to win, they have to produce an “extra effort”, to work around apparently insurmountable difficulties. The *JLE*’s relationship with France falls under this description: they have to make that “extra effort” to be recognized, simply being super-heroes is not enough. Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes, A Modern Mythology* (Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 1992).
- 17 André Kaspi « L’image de la France et de l’Allemagne aux Etats-unis apres 1945 ». Themenportal Europäische Geschichte (2006), <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2006/Article=176>. [accessed in March 2010]
- 18 Boris Le Chaffotec, « L’image de la France aux États-Unis durant la crise onusienne autour de la question de l’Irak, novembre 2002-octobre 2003 » *Bulletin de l’institut Pierre Renouvin* n°29 (April 25, 2009), <http://ipr.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?rubrique61>
- 19 *The Ultimates* (2002) recreates a team of super-heroes which appeared in 1963, *The Avengers*. It is part of the “Ultimate” line of comic books, in which older heroes are recreated in a contemporary world, in an attempt to make them more relevant to modern readers.
- 20 Mark Millar, Bryan Hitch, *The Ultimates* vol. 1 n°12 (Marvel Comics, November 2003).
- 21 For an overview of this bout of French bashing, and examples in different media, see for instance Clyde Haberman, “Lafayette, We Are Not Here for You” *The New York Times* (February 28 2003) <http://www.nytimes.com> [Accessed in March 2010]
- 22 In a nicer but equally significant episode, Stormwatch, an international organization of super-heroes manipulates the French government into providing fundings, by taking care discreetly of a staged terrorist attack on the atoll of Munuloa (!). Although the story is short, France is presented as helpless and secretly ashamed of its current geopolitical weight. Stormwatch’s leader has to reassure them in a telling dialogue “I trust you’ll be voting with our funding requests for a change, at the next United Nation’s security council meeting? No one else needs to know about your little mishap here, after all.”



“Oh, yes, absolutely. Thank you. Absolutely”. Warren Ellis and Oscar Jimenez, “Terminal Zone” [1998] in *Stormwatch: Change or Die* TPB (La Jolla: DC/Wildstorm, 1999).

23 According to a list elaborated by the US Embassy in France. <http://french.france.usembassy.gov/root/pdfs/filmsfr.pdf>

24 Michael Straczynski, Mike McKone, *Fantastic Four* n°541 (Marvel Comics, November 2006).

25 Although arguably a movie such as *G.I. Joe: Rise of Cobra* (Sommers, 2009) has much in common with super-hero comics when it comes to representing France, in that its Parisian scenes are entirely computer-generated, riddled with incongruities, and destined to provide an exotic background to an action-driven narrative.

26 Such a drift is obviously hard to demonstrate. However, reading through Bradford Wright’s *Comic Book Nation* (*op. cit.*), a study of the interaction between comic-books and the cultural values of the United States since the thirties, tends to confirm this trend. Wright’s last chapters, dealing with the comic book scene since the eighties (“Direct to the Fans”, p.254-81) shows a remarkable absence of references to anything but comic book themselves, while the author shows that previous comic books were deeply imbedded in American culture. A change in readership along with a change in distribution strategies (from general press outlets to specialty stores) appears as the most likely explanation for this shift.

27 *The Authority* follows a group of stateless Nietzschean super-heroes who have decided to take the responsibilities their powers entail, by becoming a moral and military authority over the Earth, going against established forms of government if necessary. The series is a follow up to *Stormwatch* (mentioned above), which depicted these super-heroes working within the confines of a UN sanctioned organization.

28 Mark Millar and Frank Quietly, *The Authority* n°16 (New York : DC/Wildstorm, 2000), *op. cit.*

29 In his criticisms of *The Ultimates*, noted comics commentator Tom Spurgeon identifies the nuanced treatment of Captain America as one of the strongest points of the series. He also describes the line about France as “the funniest joke” in the book, which of course does not imply that it should not be read as a cultural indicator. Tom Spurgeon “The Ultimates, Series Volume One”, *The Comics Reporter* (January 17, 2006) [http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/cr\\_reviews/3813/](http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/cr_reviews/3813/) [Accessed in October 2007].

30 The term « surrender monkey » originates in a 1995 *Simpsons* episode, and was used notably in the context of post Irak French bashing.

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### ***Pour citer cet article***

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### ***Droits d’auteur***



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### ***Résumés***

Any extensive reading of super hero comics will reveal that the representation of France within the genre borrows mostly from touristic clichés, using the country as a foreign, exotic yet not too disorientating setting. Narrative economy and gradual refinements have led to the creation

of a codified, consensual and unrealistic depiction of France, centered mostly on Paris and the Eiffel Tower. However, this efficient codification is not value-free. A study of *Justice League Europe*, a rare example of super-hero series set in France over a long period reveals that France is consistently depicted as a place of history, while being denied a contemporary significance. The country appears as a fascinating but subordinate neighbor, and this evaluation can in turn be found, albeit in a more elliptic way, in numerous series portraying France only in short episodes. The self-consciousness of modern super hero comics, however, suggests that the notion of representation should be handled with care. The depiction of France in super-hero comics originates in part in the perception of the country in the United States, but it also derives in a significant way from the internal evolutions of the genre.

La représentation de la France dans les bandes-dessinée de super-héros repose surtout sur des clichés touristiques, le pays étant utilisé comme un décor étranger et exotique, sans risquer pour autant de désorienter le lecteur. Le principe d'économie narrative et un affinage progressif ont ainsi conduit à la création d'une image codifiée, consensuelle et peu réaliste, centrée sur Paris et sur la Tour Eiffel. Cependant, cette représentation efficace n'est pas neutre. L'étude *Justice League Europe*, un des rares exemples de séries super-héroïques durablement situées en France, montre que le pays y est décrit comme un lieu d'histoire mais se voit dénier toute pertinence dans le monde contemporain. La France apparaît alors comme un voisin fascinant mais subordonné des Etats-Unis, et ce jugement se retrouve, de façon plus elliptique, dans nombre d'autres séries utilisant le pays comme décor. La grande réflexivité des bandes-dessinées de super-héros contemporaine appelle cependant à une certaine prudence quant à la notion de représentation. Le type de descriptions de la France reflète pour partie la perception du pays aux Etats-Unis, mais découle aussi largement des transformations internes du genre.